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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BOGOTA 010106

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [PHUM](#) [SNAR](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: ELN PEACE HOUSE AT ONE MONTH: INTERNATIONAL
INTEREST, DOMESTIC SKEPTICISM

REF: BOGOTA 9257 (NOTAL)

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood; reasons 1.4
(b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) The "ELN Peace House" was inaugurated one month ago after the GOC and National Liberation Army (ELN) leadership released imprisoned ELN spokesperson Gerardo Antonio Bermudez Sanchez, AKA "Francisco Galan," for three months to help establish peace talks. Galan has spent his first month under police and prison security escort in Antioquia Department outside Medellin scheduling meetings with twenty-seven sectors of Colombian society, starting with the Colombian Government and Catholic Church. The international community has demonstrated a serious interest in the process, while GOC and church contacts have expressed skepticism about the ELN's willingness to move forward with the initiative. Secretary General of the National Reconciliation Council Father Dario Echeverri (strictly protect) suggested that the ELN establish contact with those outside the group's normal support base and cautioned Galan about the possibility of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) acting as spoilers in the process.

International Community Keen

¶2. (SBU) The international community has expressed its interest in supporting the GOC-ELN process in public and private engagements. Mediation offers were first: the Panamanian, Venezuelan, Swiss, and Norwegian governments all offered their "good offices" to begin a peace process. ELN leadership approved Venezuela's offer in a September 23 communique and the Colombian Government has not officially responded. Neither side has made any public movement to proceed with Venezuelan mediation since acceptance. (Note: Embassy Panama, the GOP stated it believed Colombia would accept its offer since the Panamanians briefly brokered peace talks in the 1990s.

13. (SBU) More concretely, Norwegian and Swiss embassy officials met with the five Colombian facilitators of the consultative process (Norway, Cuba, France, Switzerland, and Spain) on October 13. Another meeting is planned for early November. Norwegian Charge Sigurd Endressen told PolCouns that the GON had donated USD 25,000 to Planeta Paz, a local NGO, to underwrite the consultation process. We understand that Norway plans to further pledge between one and two million Krone (USD 150,000-USD 300,000) to support the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights as an indirect means to support the demobilization process. Endressen reported that the Swiss also planned to donate USD 20,000 to Planeta Paz for the consultative process and the Spanish government was considering making a donation. A decision from Madrid is pending. (Note: our contacts at the OAS told us October 26 that Spain has pledged USD 1 million to the OAS mission in Colombia. End note.)

14. (SBU) European assistance was not clearly defined, according to the Norwegian Charge. He remarked that Norway's policy of petroleum revenue wealth distribution had impressed the ELN and that Norway could offer a secluded location for GOC-ELN negotiations. He said the GOC had not responded to the offer as positively as the ELN.

Domestic Response Less Enthusiastic

15. (C) Colombian participants have had a more muted response to the Peace House and its prospects. The ELN, High

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Commissioner for Peace Luis Carlos Restrepo, and local media have for the most part publically ignored the talks. Restrepo's communique on the issue calls for the ELN to select a negotiation site outside Colombia but makes no reference to the GOC's role in the Peace House. The ELN's website similarly is silent on the proceedings.

16. (C) National Reconciliation Council Secretary General Dario Echeverri told French about the Catholic Church's meetings at the Peace House on October 22. Echeverri said Church representatives were the first civil society interlocutors to meet with the ELN at the Peace House. Galan asked the six bishops in attendance to forgive the ELN's sins) in particular the murder of an archbishop, the kidnapping of a bishop, and recent "mistaken" assassinations of two parish priests. Echeverri said he had rebuffed the apologies by reminding Galan of the ELN's lesser known victims, such as civilians. He urged the ELN to get in touch with the Colombian public to reacquaint itself with Colombians' true interests. He stressed that the meetings Galan planned with twenty-seven sectors of Colombian society only played to the ELN's traditional base. Echeverri said he had pressed Galan to seek meetings with the U.S. Embassy, paramilitaries, and Colombian military officials to make the most of his consultation parole months.

FARC Intervene as the Spoiler

17. (C) Echeverri believes that the FARC will be the spoiler and prevent any peace talks from flourishing between the GOC and ELN. "Everyone has an agenda and will try to manipulate you," Echeverri told Galan. He said the FARC and ELN have an understanding only to negotiate humanitarian accords, such as prisoner exchanges, with the Uribe Administration, so other advances would inspire the FARC to retaliate against the ELN. Nevertheless, Echeverri doubts that the ELN would be willing to broker a peace deal, even without FARC interference. He listed past efforts, including the Mexican-facilitated attempt, which fell apart once peace discussions became a concrete possibility.

ELN Not Tempted to Desert

18. (C) Echeverri stressed that Galan would benefit the most from any peace negotiations since it would elevate his status among disenfranchised ELN members and possibly allow him to shorten his prison sentence under the Justice and Peace Law. However, he said ELN leader Antonio Garcia held the true power position within the ELN and had a fragile, newly established relationship with Galan. In response to French's question about ELN members' interest in individual desertions, Echeverri commented that the demobilization and reinsertion program was not attractive enough to encourage most rank and file members to desert. He said the GOC did not have the economic or judicial resources to cope with the long-term psychological issues of former terrorist fighters readjusting to civilian life. Although he recognized that the GOC could not possibly offer ongoing social and psychological support to almost 20,000 demobilized fighters, he stressed that more ELN members would gladly depart if the program appeared more successful in reintegration efforts. He warned Emboffs against underestimating the ELN's popular support despite its diminished military capacity.

19. (U) This message has been cleared by WHA/AND Philip French.
WOOD